

**SEPARATE STATEMENT OF
COMMISSIONER MICHAEL J. COPPS**

Re: *Schools and Libraries Universal Service Support Mechanism
(CC Docket No. 02-6)*

By connecting our schools and libraries to the Internet, E-Rate plays a critical role in providing our children and our communities with the digital tools necessary to compete and prosper in the Information Age. No program has been as singularly effective at making sure that young people from the poorest and most geographically isolated communities in this country are not left on the wrong side of the digital divide. The statistics are impressive and they bear repeating. When the Telecommunications Act was passed, only 14% of public school classrooms were connected to the Internet. By last year, 87% of these classrooms were connected. In rural areas, the results have been even more impressive, with 89% of public school classrooms now connected. And in schools with high percentages of students eligible for free or reduced-price lunches, we have also made substantial progress: 79% of public school classrooms are now connected.

Great programs like E-Rate do not thrive without regular review and care. The gains we have made can vanish without continued attention and, indeed, vigilance. This is why our actions today are important. So I am pleased that we adopt rules for suspension and debarment to ensure that bad actors will be denied the ability to participate in the E-Rate program. I am also pleased that we develop an online list of eligible internal connections equipment that will make it simpler for schools and libraries to develop their applications.

These are good and positive steps, but there is more work that remains to be done. We need to work harder to ensure that deserving schools and libraries receive support in a more timely way. With libraries and school districts around the country struggling under the weight of often draconian budget cuts, the need to deliver timely E-Rate support has never been more important. We also need to clarify our competitive bidding rules to ensure that applicants get the services they need at low prices. And we need to be dead serious about rooting out abuses to make sure the program functions with the integrity it must have. My hope is that as abuses are identified and eliminated, we will focus simultaneously on these other programmatic challenges that are equally high priority. In sum, we need to work together to make sure that the E-Rate's public-private commitment to technology access has a future every bit as bright as the record it has already achieved. Today's item represents a start, and I am pleased to support it.